

THE ATAKAPA-ISHAK TRIBE

TRIBAL BANDS

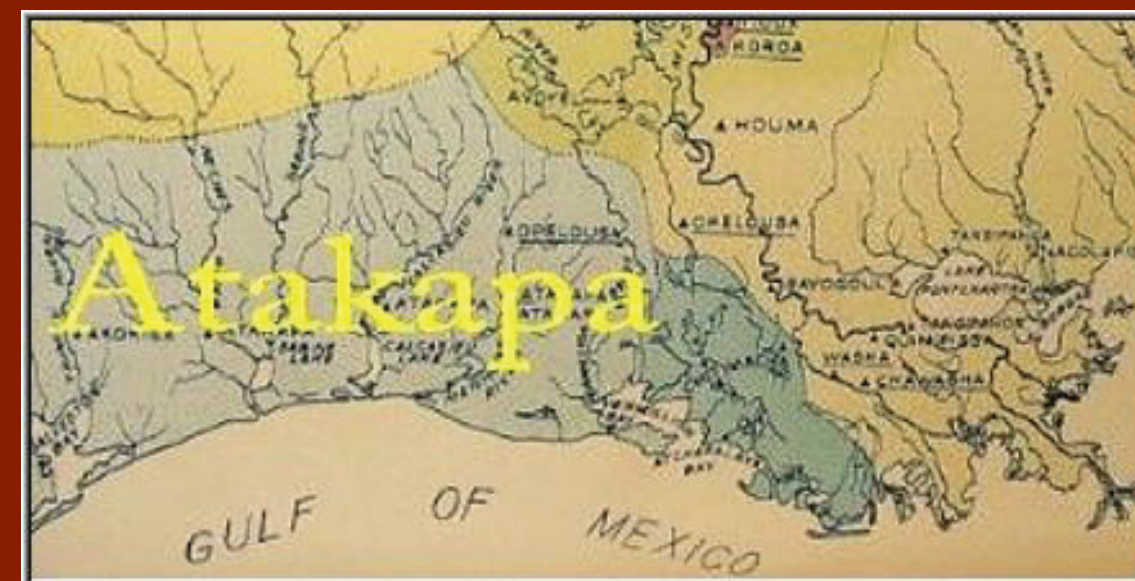


The symbols on the emblem below represent the different bands of the Atakapa-Ishak Indian Tribe. **The Heron** represents the Opelousas Band, who inhabited the prairies surrounding present-day St. Landry Parish; members of the Opelousas Band painted their lower legs black for mourning ceremonies, mimicking the long black legs of the heron. **The Eagle** represents the Calcasieu Band, who inhabited the areas between the Calcasieu and Sabine Lakes in southwestern Louisiana; they were named for the eagle which can be seen flying over those lakes. **The Snake** represents the Teche Band, who inhabited the prairies and coastal marshes surrounding St. Martinville in south central Louisiana; they were named for the snake to symbolize the winding and twisting course of Bayou Teche. **The Alligator** represents the Alligator Band on the Vermilion River in south central Louisiana. The alligator was very important to this band; its oil was used for cooking and to treat minor arthritis and eczema symptoms, its scales were used as arrow heads, and its meat was used for food. **The Panther** represents those Atakapa who inhabited southeast Texas in the areas around the Sabine River. **The Redbird** represents the western-most band in Louisiana who lived in the prairies and coastal areas of southwestern Louisiana, near what is now Lake Charles.



HISTORIC ATAKAPA-ISHAK INDIANS IN LOUISIANA

The Atakapa Indians comprised six sovereign bands, each of which had two or more villages. The eastern bands were identified as the "Sunrise People" and the western bands were identified as the "Sunset People". The **Atakapa** (a Choctaw name for the tribe) called themselves **Ishak**, which means "The People". Alternate spellings used throughout history have included Attakapa, Attakapas and Atakapas. The Atakapa inhabited the coastal and bayou areas of southwestern and south central Louisiana and southeastern Texas. The Atakapa Territory comprised an area encompassing the region bounded by Bayou Teche to the east, the Sabine River to the west, present-day Alexandria to the north, and the Gulf of Mexico to the south. Atakapa Indians



were described by early European explorers as "well built and handsome" with complexions that varied from light to dark skinned. They also often had tattoos- a widespread custom for most Native American tribes. Their clothing consisted of breechcloths and buffalo hides.

The Atakapa were known for their pottery and mound building skills. Excellent pottery has been found on ridges along the waterways near their historical settlements, as have artifacts of copper, galena and stone which were prized for their trade value. Dozens of large mounds and middens (debris piles

found at archaeological sites) have been located which are believed to be remnants of early Atakapa settlements. At one time, a great shell mound- 600 feet long and in the shape of an alligator- could be seen on a ridge above Grand Lake in Vermilion Parish until it was destroyed to make way for a modern highway in the mid-1950s.

REDISCOVERING A FORGOTTEN CULTURE

With the arrival of Europeans and subsequent development of the prairie frontiers, the Atakapa-Ishak people were pressured to relocate to less prime areas of real estate and to assimilate with other cultures.

Consequently, their unique cultural identity became diluted. By the early to mid-1900s the tribal people were labeled extinct and, to the outside world, much of the culture appeared non-existent. Yet, through strong oral history shared between generations of families, knowledge of the old ways was not completely lost.

Recent efforts among Atakapa-Ishak descendants have resulted in well over 1,000 members who are rediscovering their history and reclaiming their heritage, and they are now ready to share it with the rest of the world.

